

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

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THE MIDNIGHT WATCH

A SIGMA FORCE SHORT STORY

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JAMES ROLLINS



WILLIAM MORROW

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WE'RE UNDER ATTACK.

Jacketless, with his sleeves rolled to his elbows, Painter Crowe paced the length of the communication nest at the heart of Sigma Force's central command. Data streamed across the monitors that covered the curved walls as a single warrior waged a battle against a faceless enemy.

Jason Carter sat at a station, typing with one hand, clutching a Starbucks cup in the other, while studying the screen before him. "It looks like they built their own back door into the Smithsonian Institution's network using a high-level system administrator access. At this point, they literally have the keys to the kingdom."

"But who are *they*?" Painter stopped to stare over Jason's shoulder. The twenty-three-year old was Sigma's chief intelligence analyst. He had been recruited by Painter after getting kicked out of the navy for hacking into Defense Department servers with nothing more than a BlackBerry and a jury-rigged iPad.

"Could be the Russians, the North Koreans, but I'd place money on the Chinese. This has their fingerprints all over it. A few months back, they hacked into the Office of Personnel Management, stealing information on millions of federal employees. They used a similar back door, giving them administrator privileges to the OPM servers."

Painter nodded. He knew the Chinese government employed an army of hackers, numbering over a hundred thousand, dedicated solely to breaking into U.S. computers. Rumor had it that they had successfully hacked into every major American corporation over the past several years, absconding with blueprints to nuclear plants, appropriating technology from steel factories, even cracking into Lockheed Martin's servers to copy the top-secret schematics for the U.S. military's F-35 fighter jet. If there was any doubt about the latter, one only had to view the Chinese's new FC-31. It was almost an exact copy of the American jet.

"If it is Chinese, what are they after?" Painter asked. "Why hack into the Smithsonian servers?"

Jason shrugged his shoulders. "Either data theft or sabotage. That's the end goal of most hacks. But from the code, it looks like they're just blindly grabbing files. I'm not seeing any attempt to install malware into the systems."

"So data theft," Painter said. "Can you stop them?"

In the reflection of a neighboring dark monitor, Painter caught the young man's crooked grin. "Did that a full minute ago," Jason said, "and slammed the door behind them as I kicked them out. They won't be coming in that way again. I'm now attempting

to identify which files were taken from which servers.”

Painter glanced to the clock.

00:22

The attack had started exactly at midnight, most likely timed to strike when the hack was less liable to be detected. Still, twenty-two minutes was twenty-two minutes too long for an enemy to have unfettered access to the Smithsonian servers. The Institution was home to nine different research centers, encompassing a multitude of programs that spanned the globe.

Still, they were lucky. The only reason this attack had been caught so promptly was that Sigma Force’s servers were linked to the Smithsonian’s systems—though Sigma’s operations were heavily guarded behind multiple firewalls to keep their presence hidden. Painter imagined those towering digital walls. It was a fitting metaphor. Sigma’s central command had been covertly established beneath the Smithsonian Castle. He glanced up, picturing the turrets and towers of red sandstone above his head, a true Norman castle perched at the edge of the National Mall.

A fortress that someone had attempted to breach.

Or at least that was Painter’s greatest fear: The Smithsonian servers were not the primary target of this attack but, instead, the hackers were sniffing at the walls of Sigma’s own digital fortress. Sigma was a covert wing of DARPA, the Defense Department’s research-and-development division. The unit recruited former Special Forces soldiers and retrained them in various scientific disciplines to act as field agents for DARPA. It was one of the reasons the Castle had been chosen for Sigma’s central command. It was ideally situated within the heart of the political landscape, while allowing Sigma and its operatives to have easy access to the Smithsonian’s resources and global reach.

If Sigma was ever compromised, its agents exposed. . .

A small huff drew Painter’s attention back to the tangible world.

Jason scooted his chair back from his station, stood up, and stared across the banks of monitors, all still flowing with cryptic data. The young man studied the screens, running fingers through his blond hair, plainly concerned.

Painter stepped to his side. “What is it?”

“The pattern of theft is not random, despite how much they’re trying to make it look like it.” He pointed to one monitor. “This is no blind smash and grab. There is intent here, masked by all the rest of this noise.”

“What intent?”

Jason returned to his station and began typing again, this time with both hands, his nose inches from the screen. “A majority of the files were stolen from one specific research center.”

“Which one?”

Jason’s voice tightened with plain confusion. “The Smithsonian’s Conservation Biology Institute.”

Painter understood his consternation. It was a strange target for such a sophisticated

and elaborate cyber attack by a foreign enemy.

Jason continued as he typed. "The Smithsonian CBI has labs and facilities both in Virginia and here in D.C., at the National Zoo in Rock Creek Park. In this case, it's the campus at the zoo that was being targeted."

"Is there any rhyme or reason to the specific files that were being stolen?"

"Not that it makes any more sense, but a majority of the research material being drained comes from one specific program." Jason looked over his shoulder, displaying a deep frown. "A program titled Ancient DNA."

"Ancient DNA?"

Jason shrugged, just as lost. "The hacked files all belong to a single researcher, a postdoctoral fellow named Dr. Sara Gutierrez."

The young man leaned back from the monitor, revealing a staff identification badge on the screen. The woman on the badge looked no older than Jason, her black hair cut in a short bob, her eyes intent, with a shy grin fixed to her face.

"It looks like they cleaned out half of her files before I slammed the door on them."

"So they failed to get everything . . ." Painter felt a flicker of unease. "What was she working on?"

Jason shook his head. "All I have are the file names, which doesn't tell me much. But if I could access her computer, I might be able to trace the hackers' location. When I cut the connection, some pieces of code might have been left on her terminal, a digital fingerprint that might give us some clue as to *who* was behind this attack."

"You can do that?"

"I can try, but admittedly it's a long shot. Still, the odds would be better if I can get to that computer before anyone else uses it and accidentally wipes away that digital fingerprint."

"Understood. I'll see about arranging that. We'll also want to interview Dr. Gutierrez as soon as possible. Preferably tonight." He glanced to the wall clock. "Let's hope she's a night owl."

"I have her cell number from her records." Jason slipped out his own phone, lifting one eyebrow.

"Call it. Let her know what happened and that we need her help. We should arrange to meet at her office."

As Jason dialed, Painter considered whom to send at this late hour. His usual go-to operative, Commander Gray Pierce, was on a transatlantic flight to Europe to meet Seichan in Paris. Monk and Kat were on their way back from a road trip to Boston with their two young daughters. In his head, he ran through the remaining list of field agents best suited for this investigation.

Jason's voice caught his attention as Dr. Gutierrez answered the call. After some back and forth, the young man sat straighter and placed his cell on speakerphone mode. "And who called you?" Jason asked her.

A small voice whispered from his phone, but the confusion was plain. "They said they were with Zoological Park Police. Claimed someone had broken into my office. They were sending someone over to collect me. But . . ."

Her voice trailed off.

"But what?" Jason asked.

“It’s just . . . I don’t want to sound racist, but the caller was hard to understand. He had a thick accent. Asian, I think. It’s probably nothing, but I got a bad feeling after I hung up.”

Jason glanced worriedly in Painter’s direction. “Did you tell him your location?” he asked the woman.

“I . . . I did.”

“Where are you now?”

“I’m at the National Museum of Natural History. I was collecting DNA samples from some of the exhibits as part of my program. It’s easier after hours. I told the caller I would wait for them outside the museum at the corner of 12th and Madison.”

“Stay put.” Jason looked to Painter for confirmation. “We’ll meet you inside the museum.”

Painter nodded.

From the small speaker on the phone, a new noise erupted: a sharp and strident ringing.

Alarm bells.

The researcher’s voice rose above the din. She sounded spooked. “What do I do?”

Jason eyed Painter while offering the young woman one hope. “Hide.”

Painter thought quickly. With an alarm being raised at the museum, he had no time to summon an outside field operative. He momentarily considered going himself, but he knew he was needed here to help hold local law enforcement at bay—at least long enough to safely extract the woman.

That left only one Sigma member to assist Jason—someone still on the premises at this late hour. He pictured the muscled bulk of the former navy seaman, with his shaved head, his crooked nose, and his thick Bronx accent.

Dear god, help us all. . .

JOE KOWALSKI LAY on his back in a puddle of oil. He gave the wrench a final tug to tighten the new filter on the old Jeep. He wiped the surface clean to make sure that the gasket had stopped leaking.

That oughta do it.

He rolled out from beneath the vehicle and shifted over to a cigar resting atop an overturned glass cup. Still on his back, he placed the stub between his lips and drew a - couple hard pulls to get the end glowing brightly, then sighed out a long stream of smoke. Maybe it was stupid—and definitely against the rules—to be smoking in Sigma’s motor pool, but who was around to complain at this late hour?

He had the place to himself—which he preferred.

He climbed to his feet and inspected the ’79 Jeep CJ7 that he was restoring. He had bought the off-roader three months earlier from a retired Forest Service member who had driven it hard, then let it sit idle for almost a decade. Never a good thing for a beast that loved to tear through a rugged landscape. Kowalski had already done a mild rebuild on the Chevy 400 motor, while troubleshooting issues with the transmission, steering, and drivetrain, but he still wasn’t entirely happy with the wiring.

The open-body exterior was a patchwork of bondo and primer, with some of the

original olive-green paint showing. The front seats and rear bench, all original, were ripped and worn. He'd eventually get around to sprucing it all up, but for now, he appreciated his progress.

"You might be an ugly son of a bitch," he mumbled around his cigar, "but you can at least haul ass now."

He stared across the handful of other vehicles in the motor pool, mostly a sleek and polished mix of Land Rovers, German sedans, and a pair of Ducati motorcycles. He ran his palm over the Jeep's quarter panel, feeling the rough texture of bondo and a small buckle from an old fender bender, all testaments to its hard use and toughness.

He couldn't wait to test this beast off road, to let her truly loose.

Imagining that, he grabbed the roll bar and climbed behind the wheel—an easy enough maneuver, as both doors were leaning against the neighboring wall, waiting to be reinstalled. He turned the key. The engine coughed twice, belching smoke from the exhaust, then settled into a throaty growl.

He leaned back, allowing a satisfied grin to crack his face.

"Kowalski!"

The sharp voice made him jump. He twisted around to see the lanky form of Sigma's resident computer geek come racing into the garage. A loose navy-blue windbreaker flapped around the kid's thin shoulders, exposing a holster strapped across his chest.

"We have to move!"

Kowalski puffed out a lungful of cigar smoke. "Where?" he growled around the glowing nub.

"Across the Mall. To the National Museum of Natural History."

A twinge of fear spiked down Kowalski's spine—not for himself, but for another. It was a knee-jerk reaction. His girlfriend—or, rather, ex-girlfriend—had worked there for the past couple of years, overseeing exhibits on Greek mythology and ancient history. But Elizabeth had left three months ago for Egypt to join an archaeological dig. Their relationship had already taken a rocky turn before that and had been on its last legs. As much as opposites might initially attract, it wasn't necessarily the recipe for a long-term relationship. And though this dig in Egypt had been a great opportunity for her, he knew a large part of her drive to go had been to put some distance between them—less for her sake than his own, he suspected. It was no secret between the two of them that his torch had burned brighter.

And still did.

It was one of the reasons he had purchased the Jeep and undertaken this restoration. He needed something to distract himself with.

Jason pointed to one of the BMW sedans. "Let's go! I'll fill you in along the way!"

Kowalski flicked the nub of his cigar into a nearby pail of water. "Get your ass over here!" he called out, gunning the engine for emphasis. "We'll take my Jeep!"

Jason skidded to a stop and looked skeptically at the vehicle, but he adjusted to the change with the pliability that only came with youth. He ran to the open passenger side and hopped into the seat. He looked for the shoulder strap, but like the doors, the seat belts were also missing.

Kowalski yanked the truck into gear and bucked the vehicle forward. Jason had to grab the edge of the roll cage to keep his seat.

Hmm . . . maybe the tranny needs some further tweaking, too.

Kowalski hauled on the wheel and sent the truck rumbling toward a ramp that spiraled up to a private exit onto Independence Avenue.

Jason spoke rapidly as they climbed, filling Kowalski in on the details of a cyber attack upon the Smithsonian servers—and of a potential asset hiding inside the museum across the Mall. “Director Crowe thinks the enemy has implemented a backup plan. After failing to obtain the information electronically, they’re going directly for the source.”

For this woman . . .

Once at the top of the ramp, Kowalski pointed toward the glove compartment. “Open that.”

Jason obeyed, popping the compartment to reveal a large steel pistol resting inside. He passed the weapon over to Kowalski—using both hands. “What the hell is it?”

Kowalski accepted the huge revolver with a grin. The rubberized grip fit his meaty palm perfectly. “A .50 caliber Desert Eagle.”

“.50?” Jason said with a whistle. “What’s wrong with a .45?”

“Because they make a .50,” Kowalski said, stating the obvious.

He shoved the large pistol into his belt.

Once out onto Independence Avenue, Jason took a call from Painter as Kowalski wound them in a big circle around the Mall. He ended up behind a massive dump truck trundling and filling his side of the street. Though the National Museum of Natural History was a direct arrow shot across the Mall from the Castle, the circuitous route was further complicated by an ongoing construction project to restore the Mall’s ragged turf, which had turned this section of parkland and fields into towering piles of dirt and rock.

Jason hung up. “The director managed to convince DC Metro that it was a false alarm, blaming an electrical surge from the neighboring construction project. But such a ruse will only buy us a narrow window of time.”

Kowalski gave a shake of his head. He had to hand it to the director. Painter was a master puppeteer when it came to pulling the strings around Washington.

Jason added, “We’ve also got clearance to enter the museum through an entrance on the northwest side. It’s located—”

Kowalski cut him off. “I know where it’s at.”

He had sometimes used that entrance to reach Elizabeth’s office. It was the most direct route, bypassing the tumult of the main entrance and its flock of tourists. When the dump truck turned onto Madison, Kowalski finally got clear of it and sped up, reaching the parking lot on the western side of the museum.

He raced across the empty lot and skidded to a hard stop near the entrance. They both tumbled out and ran for the door. Jason’s head swiveled from side to side, watching for any sign of the enemy. Someone had set off that alarm. But did that mean they were already inside, or had they merely tripped the alarm to flush their quarry out into the open?

Only one way to find out.

Jason reached the entrance first and swiped a black card with a holographic Σ embossed on one side through an electronic reader. The door unlocked with a loud click of its dead bolt. Jason began to open the door, but Kowalski moved him aside and led the way with his Desert Eagle. He entered a nondescript anteroom with a door ahead

that opened onto the main levels of the museum. The mouth of a dark stairwell yawned on his left.

“Where is this doctor?” Kowalski asked as Jason followed him inside.

“The alarm was triggered from a first-floor window on the building’s north side.” He pointed in that general direction. “To keep her well away from that spot, we told her to hole up in Dr. Polk’s old office in the basement.”

Kowalski glanced sharply back at the kid. “Elizabeth’s old place?”

Why send her to my ex’s office?

“We knew Dr. Polk’s room was empty. The director also chose the rendezvous because you are familiar with the surrounding area. In case we run into trouble.”

Great . . . I’m really beginning to hate this place.

With a sigh, Kowalski led Jason to the stairwell and headed down. The steps ended at a maze of narrow passageways that spread under the museum. The way forward was dimly lit with the crimson glow of emergency lights. It was one of the oldest sections of the building, barely touched during the periodic renovations of the public spaces. Beneath their boots, the old marble floors had been honed to a lustrous sheen by decades of shuffling feet. Wooden doors with frosted glass windows lined either side, each pane etched with scholarly enterprises: ENTOMOLOGY, MINERAL SCIENCES, VERTEBRATE ZOOLOGY, BOTANY.

Kowalski knew the path to Elizabeth’s office all too well. Memories flickered in the shadows of his mind as he tried to concentrate, to listen for any sign of threat. He remembered picnicking with Elizabeth in her office, hearing her laugh, basking in her smiles. He remembered the two of them stealing away into the old steam tunnels beneath the museum to smoke cigars, which even she partook of on occasion. He also remembered other midnight hours, he dozing on her couch while she finished cataloging a new shipment from Greece or Italy, other times when they were engaged in less studious pursuits, wrapped in each other’s arms. He felt his blood stirring at those last thoughts and pushed them down—deep down.

Now was not the time.

Still, he could not escape darker memories, of those times when his impatience irritated her, when smiles turned to frowns; when words, spoken on both sides, became painful. They were both hotheaded, both too easy to bruise. Perhaps with time, they would have learned to settle into each other with more care, but all too often he’d been called away on missions abroad, on pursuits he hadn’t even been able to talk about upon returning. Likewise, she’d been gone for weeks on end: to dusty digs, to laborious scientific conferences. And while apart, their intimate daily calls, which had previously often lasted for hours, had eventually faded to curt text messages.

And when the end had finally come, it hadn’t been any operatic act of betrayal. It had simply been the tide of their relationship ebbing away, until neither of them had been able to dismiss the inevitable. Ever the smarter of the two, Elizabeth had recognized it first and laid out the facts over a long, cold dinner.

Still, it hurt.

At last, a dark door appeared ahead. The frosted glass read ANTHROPOLOGY. Below that, hanging on the door from small hooks, was a black metal placard with silver letters that spelled ELIZABETH POLK, PHD.

"Here we are," Kowalski said needlessly.

Surprised that she had left the placard, he bent down to unhook it. As he did so, the pane shattered above his head, accompanied by the loud retort of a pistol blast.

JASON DROPPED TO one knee and spun around, cleanly pulling out his side arm, a SIG Sauer P226. He squeezed the trigger twice, shooting blindly down the hall in the direction of the gunshot, hoping to discourage the sniper from firing again. He wasn't entirely successful. A second gunshot blasted from the shadows, splintering wood from the doorframe by his shoulder.

Then a cannon went off by his ear.

A clipped cry rose from down the hall.

Kowalski held his smoking weapon and growled at him. "Get inside!"

Jason dove behind the large man's bulk, grabbed the doorknob—thankfully, the door was unlocked—and shoved the way open with his shoulder. He rolled inside, drawing Kowalski in his wake. Once clear, Jason slammed the office door closed, dislodging a few shattered panes of glass. Though it offered little protection, he thumbed the lock.

"Sara," he called to the dark room, while staying low. "It's Jason Carter."

A small gasp rose from behind the desk. "I'm over here."

He spotted a shadow rising from out of hiding.

"Stay down," he warned.

"They must've tailed us down here," Kowalski grumbled, rising enough to peer out the shattered window.

It made sense. They should have been more cautious. The enemy couldn't have known *where* Dr. Gutierrez had holed up.

Until we led them here, Jason realized.

Either he and Kowalski had been spotted entering the building, or some small expeditionary force had already been inside and had come upon their path down here. Either way, they were trapped.

"This way," Kowalski said and headed away from the door in a hunched crouch. "There's a small storeroom in the back."

Jason followed, collecting Dr. Gutierrez along the way.

Wearing a white lab coat over jeans, she sidled next to him. She clutched a black leather satchel to her chest with one arm. "Thank you," she whispered.

Don't thank us yet.

Jason looked around. The office was large, with shelved walls, a large desk, and an old leather sofa against one wall. But besides a handful of stray papers, it had been thoroughly cleaned out. Kowalski led them to a narrow door on the far side, which stood ajar.

They all piled into the next room, which was twice the size of the office and divided by tall metal shelves. A pair of wooden pallets leaned against one wall. Jason imagined the storeroom had been used as a staging ground for Dr. Polk's work on her antiquities collection.

Kowalski closed the door, which was made of solid pine. Still, it wouldn't give a determined enemy much of a problem, especially since there was no way to lock it from

the inside. This didn't seem to bother Kowalski as he headed over to the middle of the room and bent down to a solid grate in the floor. It was sealed with a padlock.

Dropping to a knee and using the light of his cell phone for illumination, Kowalski spun the dial back and forth. Behind them, a tinkle of glass whispered from the neighboring room. Jason pictured a hand reaching through the shattered pane for the lock.

Hurry. . .

Kowalski freed the padlock and hauled up the heavy grate with one arm. A dark opening yawned below. "There's a ladder on the left. It's a short climb down into one of the service tunnels beneath the museum."

Jason didn't question Kowalski's plan or where it might lead. For the moment, the goal was to stay one step ahead of the enemy. He went first, mounting the steel rungs, then helping guide Sara along with him. Rushing, he stumbled as one boot slipped. He ended up sliding the rest of the way down, which luckily was only a couple of yards. He landed roughly, but managed to keep his feet and get Sara safely to the ground.

Overhead, Kowalski closed the grate with a soft clang, then slid down the ladder without a boot touching a rung. He had plainly done this before.

Jason unclipped a penlight and flashed it along the tunnel. The place was sweltering, smelling of wet cement, and echoing with trickles of water. Old pipes, frosted with cobwebs, trailed along the ceiling.

"Where are we?" Sara asked.

Kowalski pushed between them and led the way forward. "Old steam and service tunnels. Elizabeth and I would sometimes sneak down here and smoke." He patted the walls. "It was the safest place without having to climb all the way back outside."

Jason heard a mix of sorrow and wistfulness in his voice.

"Where are we going?" Sara asked, voicing Jason's own concern.

Kowalski coughed to clear his throat a bit. "Place is a maze down here. Some say these tunnels once reached all the way under the White House, but with heightened security, much of it's been partitioned and walled off." He pointed ahead as he turned a corner. "There are stairs this way that lead back up to a service door into the museum."

As they made the corner, a loud clang rang out behind them.

The enemy had discovered their escape route.

Jason flashed his light across the floor of the tunnel. Their footprints in the grime would be easy to follow.

Muffled voices rose behind them.

"Time to haul ass," the big man warned, urging them forward.

Again, Jason didn't question his plan.

KOWALSKI SHOVED THE Desert Eagle back into his belt and followed the others up the cement stairs. He fumbled with his wallet as he climbed, searching through its contents.

Where the hell are you . . . ?

By now, Jason had reached the stained cement landing at the top of the stairs. A yellow emergency bulb offered meager illumination, enough to reveal a nondescript steel door. It looked like it dated from the museum's opening day, but a modern electronic

lock sealed it securely.

Jason tugged on the handle, but it was no use.

Kowalski's fingers finally plucked a card from the many stuffed into a side pocket of his tattered leather billfold. It was an old staff keycard. In one corner, barely discernible under the glow of the lone bulb, was a tiny picture of Elizabeth Polk. Her chestnut hair framed high cheekbones, while a pair of petite eyeglasses balanced on her nose. Elizabeth had given the card to him shortly after they had begun dating, making it easier for him to come and go while visiting her. He should have returned it or cut it up, but he hadn't been able to do either.

The furtive patter of boots on stone echoed up from below.

"Kowalski . . ." Jason hissed to him.

Kowalski hurried forward with the card, praying it was still coded to this service door. He swiped the card down the slit under a red glowing light—it remained red.

Motherfu. . .

Jason stared at him with huge eyes. Dr. Gutierrez huddled at his shoulder. Beads of sweat pebbled her forehead, while her lips were fixed in a grimace of fear. They were sitting ducks up here.

Kowalski rubbed the keycard's magnetic strip over the sleeve of his jacket. "Sometimes these old readers are finicky."

God, I hope that's it.

A shout rose from below as the enemy abandoned any furtiveness.

Jason swung to the side and used the muzzle of his gun to shatter the lone bulb in its cage. Darkness fell around them, offering some shelter. The kid pulled the woman low, while pointing his gun toward the stairs. He fired once to encourage their pursuers to proceed more cautiously.

Kowalski swiped his card again.

C'mon, Elizabeth, don't let me down.

Despite his silent plea, the tiny light remained red.

What the hell!

He fingered the card, wondering if he didn't deserve this fate. But under his fingertips, he realized the magnetic strip was on the wrong side. In the dark, he had the card turned around the wrong way.

He flipped the card, jammed it through the reader, and watched the light flash to green, accompanied by a gratifying roll of tumblers. He grabbed the handle and shoved the door open.

They all piled into the hallway. Kowalski slammed the door behind them, then leaned against it with relief. Muffled shots rang out from the far side, ricocheting brightly off the steel, reminding them they had no time to relish this small victory.

"We need to keep going," Jason warned. "There's no telling how many more might be out here."

Kowalski nodded. "Follow me."

He pushed off the door and ran down the hall to a stairwell. It was the same one he and Jason had used to reach the basement level. They fled back up to the side exit. Kowalski had his Desert Eagle in hand again, and he waved Jason and Dr. Gutierrez through the door as he propped it open and covered them. He watched the parking lot

for any sign of an ambush, while listening with an ear cocked for any sound of pursuit from within the museum.

The Jeep stood only a handful of yards away. Jason got the young woman into the front passenger seat, then hopped onto the rear bench. The kid stood with his back against the roll bar and raised his SIG Sauer, swiveling it to cover the lot.

“Go!” Jason ordered.

Kowalski rolled away from the door, letting it close behind him, and sprinted around the front of the Jeep to reach the driver’s side. As he climbed in, he heard a screaming whine rise from behind the museum. He remembered Jason saying that the alarm had been tripped from a broken window back there.

As Kowalski fumbled the key into the ignition, he watched a single headlight come careening around the far corner into the parking lot. It was a motorcycle, bearing two helmeted riders. The one in the rear rose high in his seat, lifting a rifle to his shoulder.

Kowalski twisted the key, and the engine coughed and died.

A rifle blast exploded across the quiet night.

The windshield fractured.

Son of a bitch. . .

Jason returned fire from the back, shooting over the roll bar. Kowalski pumped the accelerator once, then tried the key again, suddenly very worried about his wiring job on the ignition coil. But the engine coughed—then caught with a jolt of the frame, growling roughly.

Good enough.

He yanked them into reverse, then shoved his boot to the floor. The Jeep sped backward, earning a hard *oof* from Jason as the roll bar slammed into his chest. But the kid’s assault had succeeded in driving the motorcycle to the side, forcing the enemy to zigzag through a copse of trees flanking 12th Street.

Taking advantage of the moment, Kowalski yelled, “Hold tight!” and yanked hard on the wheel.

The Jeep jackknifed around.

Jason hugged the roll bar with one arm to keep his footing.

Dr. Gutierrez slid from her seat into Kowalski’s side, but he still managed to shift into first. He sped them away, aiming for Madison Drive, which ran along the front of the museum.

“Kowalski!” Jason hollered.

But he had already spotted the threat. Two more motorcycles converged on their position, coming from opposite directions down Madison: one traveling with traffic, weaving swiftly through the scatter of cars at this hour; the other coming the wrong way down the one-way street.

Gunfire erupted behind them as the first bike took erratic potshots at them.

Rounds pinged off his bumper and back panel.

Jason returned fire just as wildly.

As the Jeep reached the end of the lot, Kowalski thought quickly. He hated to carry this battle to the streets, where innocent bystanders might be caught in the firefight. Plus even if he attempted to take Madison, he would be pinned down on all sides.

That left only one choice.

“Duck low and hold tight!” he ordered his passengers.

He gunned the engine, shifting rapidly up through the three gears, and shot out across Madison. He passed across the path of a late-night bus and between the two converging motorcycles. He hit the far curb, bounced the Jeep high, and crashed through the temporary fencing that surrounded the section of the National Mall that was under construction. He landed hard on all four tires and kept going without slowing.

Ahead, the landscape was a roiled mix of rock piles, towering dunes of soil, and treacherous pits. This phase of the construction project ran the half-mile stretch from 7th Street almost to the foot of the Washington Monument.

“What’re you doing?” Jason called out.

“What the hell does it look like?”

“Looks like you don’t know what you’re doing!”

“Exactly! It’s called improvising!”

As Jason let out a loud groan, Kowalski headed deeper into the tortured terrain at breakneck speed. In the rearview mirror, he saw the three motorcycles close in behind him. The enemy was not giving up that easily.

Kowalski remembered earlier how he had wanted to test this Jeep off road.

Looks like I’m about to get my chance.

JASON HUGGED ONE arm around the roll bar as the Jeep sped deeper into the excavation site. Ahead, the brightly lit spire of the Washington Monument rose into the night sky.

As the Jeep rattled over the uneven ground, he did his best to keep his balance on the rear bench seat, assisted by the fact that one boot had ripped through the worn fabric and sunk into the springs.

A rifle blasted behind him, the round pinging off the back hatch of the vehicle. Still keeping one arm hooked to the bar, he raised his SIG Sauer and fired wildly at the closest motorcycle. It had a good thirty-yard lead on the other two and looked ready to close the distance by itself.

More rifle flashes burst from the cycle. Again all the rounds struck low: into the dirt or ricocheting off the bumper.

Must be trying to take out the back tires. . .

If so, it suggested they were trying to keep Sara alive.

But why?

“Hang on!” Kowalski called out.

What do you think I’m doing back here?

As the lead bike gunned toward them, Kowalski carved a sharp turn around a tall berm of loose dirt. The vehicle tilted precariously. Kowalski expertly downshifted, then punched the accelerator again.

The thick-treaded tires dug into the mound of soil and cast a roostertail behind the Jeep. The cascading wave of dirt and gravel struck the trailing motorcycle, swamping it and knocking it to the ground.

Kowalski cleared the berm and set off again.

Jason regained his legs, searching behind them.

One down. . .

The two other bikes hit the berm, flew high, landed expertly on their back wheels—and sped after them.

A new barrage of gunfire chased them, coming from both motorcycles.

Jason felt a round whistle past his ear. Two others pelted the top edge of the windshield. Kowalski pushed Sara lower, almost cramming her into the foot well. Jason followed his example and dropped flat to the bench seat.

The sudden change in tactics by the enemy suggested that circumstances had changed, that new orders had been radioed from their superiors.

Shoot to kill.

KOWALSKI KEPT ONE eye on the shadowy terrain ahead of him and another on the rearview mirror. The two angry black hornets gained on his position. The riders had momentarily stopped firing, hunkering down instead, forgoing the attack to race faster.

He understood their plan.

They intended to flank him, to trap the Jeep in cross fire.

Like hell . . . you're on my home turf now.

Though admittedly that turf was long gone. Over the past month, he'd often climbed up to the roof of the Castle and watched the heavy equipment scrape away the old lawn, haul in truckloads of new topsoil, and excavate irrigation trenches and deep pits for future cisterns. He had found the rumble of John Deere motors and the chatter of work crews to be soothing. It was his white noise, his version of the patter of rain or the sonorous calls of whales.

"Where are you going?" Jason called to him, a note of panic in his voice.

Ahead, a mountain of dirt blocked their path, climbing two stories.

"Up," he answered.

He had no doubt the Jeep could tackle this summit, but he needed all the torque he could muster from the Chevy engine. He momentarily slowed, dropping a gear. The two motorcycles narrowed the gap, each swinging wider, preparing to flank him. From the blistering screams of those bikes, he imagined they were stretching their two-stroke engines to their limits.

But was it enough for the steep banks of loose dirt?

Let's find out.

As he reached the foot of the mountain, he pounded the accelerator, while popping into first. The Jeep's wheels momentarily spun—then the treads caught, and the vehicle bolted forward like a spanked horse. It shot up the steep slope, accelerating swiftly, proving how true a thoroughbred the vehicle was deep down.

Dr. Gutierrez gasped, falling back in her seat; Jason swore behind him.

The enemy gave chase, riding up the bank of topsoil. Both riders were plainly skilled, shimmying their rear tires to keep from miring down in the dirt. They soon drew even with Kowalski's rear bumper, their reflections filling either side mirror. The bikers freed pistols from thigh holsters, readying to open fire on the Jeep.

"Kowalski!" Jason moaned.

The crest of the mountain was only yards away. Still, they'd never reach the top before being overtaken.

Just as well.

Kowalski slammed the brakes hard, drawing the Jeep to a swift stop.

The maneuver was too sudden for the enemy to respond. Both bikes blasted past the Jeep's stalled position, then reached the summit and shot high. Kowalski tried to imagine the view from those bikes.

He grinned darkly and edged the Jeep up to the top. From that lofty vantage, he watched the two cycles arc high—then tumble headlong toward a massive pit on the mountain's far side. The hill had been formed as the construction crew had dug out a deep cistern, one that was destined to hold over two hundred thousand gallons of water.

Plus two motorcycles now.

The pair of bikes crashed hard into the muck at the bottom of the pit.

Jason patted Kowalski on the shoulder as he reversed the Jeep down the embankment. "I owe you."

"A dozen hand-rolled Cubans and we'll call it even." Kowalski turned to Dr. Gutierrez, who looked pale and near shock. "So why are you so important?"

JASON LET SARA breathe heavily for a couple of minutes before pursuing Kowalski's line of questioning. Once the Jeep cleared out of the restoration site and got back onto Madison Drive, he leaned forward in the backseat. Behind him, he watched the flashing lights of emergency vehicles closing in on the Mall.

It was time to get clear of here—and get some answers.

"Sara, can you tell us what you were working on for the Smithsonian? Why you were at the museum?"

She turned toward him. Her eyes were still huge, but her breathing had calmed. "I'm here on a fellowship, working with the Smithsonian's Ancient DNA program."

Jason had gleaned that much from her staff file. "What sort of work are you doing for them?"

She gave a confused shake of her head. "The goal of our program is to study genetic variability and changes over time in various species. To help achieve that, my colleagues and I extract and analyze DNA from ancient sources."

"Ancient sources?"

"From mineralized bones, archaeological artifacts, or in the case tonight . . ." She retrieved her leather satchel from the foot well and placed it protectively in her lap. "From museum specimens."

Kowalski grimaced at the bag. "What sort of *specimens*?"

"Each of us is assigned a different taxonomic family of species. In my case, I work with all Hominidae. That covers all the great apes. Orangutans, gorillas, chimpanzees, and bonobos."

"But also one other," Jason added. "Hominidae also includes the genus *Homo*, which includes us humans."

She nodded, glancing more intently at him for knowing this. "That's right. I've collected and documented genomic samples from most known hominin species, from the most ancient to modern man." She ticked them off. "*Homo erectus*, *Homo habilis*, *Homo neanderthalensis*, and several other obscure ancestors of ours. It's why I was at the

museum tonight. To collect DNA samples from a newly acquired set of fossils.”

“And you’ve been storing these results on your lab computer?”

“That’s right.”

Jason leaned back, struggling to understand what the Chinese might want with such esoteric scientific data. It made no sense. But for the moment that could wait. He remembered the mission assigned to him: secure not only Dr. Gutierrez but also her computer. Beyond safeguarding the files that had not been stolen in the initial cyber attack, he was still hoping there might be some digital evidence left on her computer that might point to the perpetrator.

“Sara, I need to access your computer . . . tonight . . . before anyone corrupts what’s there. After we drop you off somewhere safe—”

She swung toward him. “I’ll need to go with you.”

“Why?”

“My computer is doubly secured, both with an alphanumeric password and an EyeLock myris system.”

“What’s that?” Kowalski asked.

Jason groaned, knowing the answer. It was a commercially available iris scanner used for identity authentication. “Looks like we’re all sticking together a while longer.”

FIFTEEN MINUTES LATER, Kowalski drove the Jeep down a small, winding road through Rock Creek Park. The darkly forested route led toward the rear of the National Zoo property, where a private gate offered easy access to the campus of the Rock Creek Research Labs.

“The gate should be around the next bend,” Sara said as she shivered against the gale of cold wind sweeping across the open-air vehicle.

Kowalski had cranked the heater up as high as it would go, but it was like holding your hands around a candle in a blizzard. He found his own teeth beginning to chatter.

“My office is only a short distance past the fence,” she promised them.

Jason leaned closer to Kowalski. “The director has the campus locked down by the Zoological Park Police. They should be waiting for us at the gate.”

Sara lifted a white staff card. “If not, I have my pass.”

As the Jeep rounded the bend, the perimeter fence appeared. A small service gate stood open, lit by a single lamppost. Kowalski spotted no guards or the promised police escort.

He shared a worried look with Jason.

“Maybe the staff left it open for us,” the kid offered. “Or maybe they’re waiting for us at Sara’s office.”

And maybe pigs fly out my ass.

As he approached the gate, Kowalski goosed the Jeep faster, just in case anyone tried to ambush them at the fencerow. None of his passengers asked him to slow down.

He sped through the gate and onto the zoo grounds. A cluster of office buildings hugged both sides of the road ahead, looking like any business complex. Beyond them, past another fence, the main park beckoned.

“My office is in the second building on the left.”

It appeared to be the only one lit up this night. A lone figure stood limned against that glow.

“That’s Jill Masterson,” Sara said, sighing out her relief, plainly happy to see a familiar face. “She’s a lieutenant with the park police.”

Kowalski drew alongside the officer, still searching for any threat. As he kept the engine idling, he could make out the nighttime cries and calls of the neighboring park’s denizens. The breeze carried the scent of cherry blossoms, along with an underlying heavier musk blowing from the grounds.

The lieutenant approached. She appeared to be in her midthirties. She was fit, dressed in a crisp park uniform with her auburn hair tucked into a cap. From the scowl fixed to her face, she was not happy about this midnight assignment.

She introduced herself, then added, “I’m not sure why my boss roused park services to open the gate and secure this building. Everything’s been quiet.” She offered a brief smile toward Sara. “But it sounds like you’ve had a rough night, Dr. Gutierrez.”

“And I’ll be happy when it’s over.”

They all unloaded and headed toward the office building.

“I thought there would be more boots on the ground here,” Jason commented.

Masterson cocked an eyebrow at him. “At this hour? We’re not DC Metro. With budget cuts, we barely have enough staff during the day. Still, I managed to corral three officers to canvass the building and make sure everything is secure. I still have a man inside.”

“What about the other two?” Kowalski asked.

“Once we had matters in hand, I sent them back into the park. We got a glass-breakage alarm at the front gate’s kiosk a few minutes ago. They went to check—” From their expressions, she must have known something was wrong. “What?”

“It’s like back at the museum,” Sara moaned.

Jason forced them to move faster. “Everyone inside. We need to secure that computer and set up a defense. Radio your man, Lieutenant.”

She obeyed, confirming that all remained quiet inside.

Still, Kowalski pulled out his Desert Eagle, which earned a double take from Masterson. Jason took out his cell phone and called Painter, filling him in on the fly. As they entered the front door of the building, Sara guided them in a rush toward her lab offices at the back.

“Help’s coming,” Jason said as he hung up.

Let’s hope they get here in time.

As they crossed the lobby, a loud roar echoed to them.

Kowalski froze, but Sara smiled nervously back at him. “That’s Anton, a Siberian tiger caged in the neighboring Reproductive Sciences Department. They’ve been collecting semen from him this week as part of an endangered tiger breeding program.”

Lucky him.

She glanced down a side hall. “Anton’s generally a pussycat, but he’s notoriously cranky when woken up early.”

Me, too.

They hurried to the back of the building and found Masterson’s other man waiting inside Sara’s office. He introduced himself as John Kress and joined his boss in guarding

the hall as Jason followed Sara into the depths of her lab. The small space was cramped with stainless steel equipment, shelves of glassware and pipettes, tall freezers, and a workbench holding a trio of computers.

“Mine’s in the center,” Sara said.

Jason pulled out a portable thumb drive. “If you can get me access, I need to copy the root directory to capture any malicious executable code and get a record of the night’s TCP/IP connections. After that, I’ll try to—”

Sara cut him off. “Do anything you have to.”

She woke up her computer, typed in the long string of a password, and lifted a wired blue puck toward her face. A small light flashed across her left eye, then the blank login screen cleared, revealing her desktop.

She stepped back. “All yours.”

Jason took her place and slipped his drive into a USB port on the side of her keyboard. He began typing rapidly with one hand, while manipulating her wireless mouse with the other.

“Interesting,” Jason mumbled.

Sara drew closer. “What?”

“The hackers seemed to have targeted any of your files tagged as *N_sis*.” He glanced back to her. “What does that stand for?”

“It’s just my shorthand for *Neanderthalensis*,” she answered. “Those are my files comparing Neanderthal sequences with those of modern man, highlighting those genes we obtained from our long-lost ancestor. Most of us carry a small percentage of Neanderthal genes, some of us more than others.”

Kowalski waited for someone to glance in his direction at this last statement, but thankfully no one did.

Jason suddenly swore, lifting his hands from the keyboard. Files flashed on the screen, opening and closing on their own, as if there was a ghost in the machine. But it wasn’t any *ghost*.

“We’re being hacked,” Jason realized. “Right now.”

JASON KICKED HIMSELF for being so stupid, so shortsighted. He considered yanking the power cord to the computer, but he knew it was already too late. In just that fraction of inattention, they’d stolen everything.

“What’s happening?” Sara asked, watching as he furiously typed.

“As soon as you logged on, the first thing I did was cut your computer off from the Internet, from the world at large, but someone attacked your server through your LAN. Your local area network.”

“And that means what?” Kowalski asked.

“The hacker must still be in the area, close enough to have connected to the system locally. Probably in the same building. They must’ve waited to ambush the system but first needed Sara to unlock it.”

No wonder the enemy tried to avoid killing her at the outset. They wanted her to return here and access her computer.

“Even the false alarm must have been used to lure Masterson’s forces away,” Jason

realized aloud, “long enough so that they could get an operative close enough to orchestrate the attack.”

“But *where* are they?” Kowalski asked.

Jason continued to type. “That’s what I’m trying to figure out, but whoever did this mirrored their trace across *eight* different computers.”

Sara clutched her arms across her chest. “That’s the number of computers networked in this building,” she said, confirming his fear.

“Doesn’t matter,” Kowalski said, swinging toward the door. “I know where they’re at.”

Jason looked over a shoulder at him. “How?”

KOWALSKI COLLECTED LIEUTENANT Masterson and the other officer on his way out the door and down the hall. “One of you, head outside and canvass the perimeter. The other, stay in the lobby and cover the front door.”

Just in case I’m wrong.

He had a narrow window to catch the culprits red-handed and retrieve what was stolen. He left Masterson in the lobby as the other officer ran for the front door. He headed to the left, to the hall he had noted Sara glancing down earlier—when the tiger had roared.

He remembered her earlier words: *Anton’s generally a pussycat, but he’s notoriously cranky when woken up early.*

He hoped she was right on both counts.

He had initially written off the tiger’s outburst as a complaint against their arrival, but what if whoever had bothered the tiger was closer at hand, invading the animal’s private space? Maybe that was what had made him cranky.

It was a thin lead, but better than nothing.

He reached a set of double doors with a sign that read DEPARTMENT OF REPRODUCTIVE SCIENCES. He hoped Jason was as good as he claimed to be. The kid had said he could hack into the building’s security system and unarm all the building’s electronic locks, opening a path for Kowalski.

He tested the knob, and it turned freely.

Good job, kid.

Leading with his Desert Eagle, he cracked the door enough to slip inside, then closed it behind him. The hallway ahead was dark, flanked by small offices. The main reproductive lab was directly ahead of him at the end of the hall.

That’s where Sara said the department’s main server was located. He hoped it was the correct networked computer. He had one in eight odds of being right.

He edged down the hall, sticking to one wall.

His ears strained for any sign of an intruder—then he heard glass break, followed by a shout from outside. A loud gunshot exploded from inside the lab ahead.

Kowalski rushed forward, hit the swinging set of doors, and slid low into the room. Skidding on his knees, he took in the view while bracing his Desert Eagle. The reproductive lab looked more like an operating room, with a pair of stainless steel hydraulic tables, overhead swing-arm lights, and banks of glass cabinets.

Between the tables, a computer rested on a large desk.

At the station, a small, wiry figure was detaching a palm-sized drive from the back of the monitor, while on Kowalski's left, a man who matched him in size and muscle stood bathed in the moonlight flowing through a shattered window. The guy held a smoking pistol in hand—likely used to fire at the officer outside. The weapon whipped toward Kowalski and fired.

Unable to get clear fast enough, he took the round square to the chest. The impact knocked the air from his lungs and exploded his rib cage with fiery pain. He dropped to his back—and returned fire from under the table on that side. The cannon boomed deafeningly in his hand. The plaster exploded behind the man's legs as the shot went wide. Still, Kowalski took advantage of the moment to roll behind a steel medical cart. The man fired after him, rounds pelting the side of the cart, keeping Kowalski pinned down.

He patted his chest, expecting to find blood, but instead he felt the dented steel plate in his front pocket. It was the nameplate he had unhooked from Elizabeth's office door earlier. He had forgotten he had stolen it, absently slipping it inside his jacket. It had saved his life—at least for the moment.

Sirens sounded in the distance, racing closer.

Must be the reinforcements sent by Director Crowe.

Kowalski gripped his pistol and risked peering past the edge of his shelter.

The small figure by the computer—a young woman—also recognized the approaching threat and called to her partner while pointing to the window.

“Kwan, zǒu!”

The man grimaced, clearly being ordered to leave.

With the portable drive in hand, she headed over to her partner's side, ready to make their escape. She had her own pistol out and fixed toward Kowalski's position, as if daring him to show himself.

But Kowalski wasn't the only one irritated by the intruders.

Farther to his left, a tall, shadowy cage door swung open with a creak of heavy steel hinges—and a massive beast stalked into the lab. It seemed Jason's release of *all* the building's electronic locks had included the tiger's cage. A snarling hiss flowed from the cat's throat, and its fur bristled in stripes of black and rust. Paws the size of dinner plates padded across the floor in slow, determined steps, drawn by the figures standing in the moonlight.

The woman backed fearfully from the sight. She tried to pocket the bulky drive, but it slipped from her fingers and clattered to the floor. Clearly panicked, she gripped her pistol with both hands.

Her partner also kept his weapon upon the beast. *“Bù, Shu Wei,”* he whispered to the woman, warning her not to shoot or risk antagonizing the tiger, who was still plainly confused by the noise and commotion.

Instead, he scooped his free arm around the small woman's waist, lifting and drawing her to his side as easily as if she'd been a doll, then the pair fell backward through the open window. The tiger stalked over, drawn by the motion. It sniffed at the breeze, then stretched its neck to a jaw-cracking yawn.

Kowalski used the distraction to back slowly out of hiding—but his knee banged

against the corner of the metal cart. The tiger whipped around at the sudden noise, dropping into a hissing crouch. Kowalski dove for the only refuge at hand. He flung himself headlong through the open door of the cage and yanked the gate shut behind him.

The tiger pounced after its prey, slamming into the front of the cage.

Kowalski kept his hands clamped to the bars, holding the door closed.

The tiger rolled to its feet, stalking a bit back and forth, ruffling its fur as if shaking off water. Large brown eyes stared at Kowalski, while hot breath pantled through the bars.

“That’s a good kitty, Anton,” Kowalski said softly, hoping it was true.

A large huff escaped the beast’s throat, as if it recognized its name. The tiger stalked back and forth twice more, then settled to the floor, slumping against the bars. After several tense moments, a low rumbling purr flowed from its bulk.

Kowalski swallowed hard—then, knowing he would never have a better chance, he risked reaching through the bars and running his fingers through the warm ruff of the great beast. The purring deepened, proving Sara was right.

You are a pussycat.

As if Anton sensed this thought, the timbre of his purr rattled into a deep, warning grumble. Kowalski retracted his hand.

Okay, maybe not.

THREE HOURS LATER, Kowalski was back in the motor pool. Painter had debriefed him, and medical had cleared him. Though his rib cage still ached with every breath, he hadn’t even broken a rib.

With a smoldering cigar clamped between his molars, Kowalski stared down at the bent length of steel, dimpled in the center from the 9mm round. He had wanted to dismiss his survival as dumb luck, like something out of a movie, but he knew a part of him had slipped the nameplate inside his jacket on purpose.

Placing it over my heart.

The only luck here was that the Chinese assassin had been such a crack shot.

If he had struck a few inches in any other direction. . .

He ran his fingers over the silver letters, knowing in this moment that their love had saved him this night.

Thanks, Elizabeth . . .

He contemplated repairing the plate, returning it to its pristine condition. Maybe even sending it to her in Egypt with some note, some last attempt at reconciliation. Instead, he exhaled a stream of smoke, recognizing the futility of such an act and accepting the reality of the situation—maybe truly for the first time.

And that was okay.

With a flick of his wrist, he tossed the nameplate into a trash bin, knowing that was where it belonged.

He turned and crossed over to the Jeep. He ran his palm along the front quarter panel, feeling the dimpling of bullet rounds here, too.

He smiled around his cigar.

You, my beautiful girl . . . you I can fix.

PAINTER CROWE STOOD inside the communication nest of Sigma command, while Jason Carter once again worked at one of the stations. It had been a long night, with still more meetings scheduled at daybreak. There remained countless unanswered questions, mysteries that would need further investigation in the days ahead.

While Sigma had recovered the drive abandoned by the pair of Chinese spies at the lab—thus safeguarding most of Dr. Sara Gutierrez’s research—Jason’s forensic analysis of the cyber attack offered no concrete answers as to *who* was actually behind all of this. The Chinese government had already gone into full plausible-deniability mode, and Painter doubted any attempt to identify the three bodies recovered from the Mall’s excavation site would trace back to Beijing. The other assailants, along with the two spies at the zoo, had vanished into the wind.

But even more disconcerting was the fact that the *goal* behind all of this remained a complete enigma.

Jason spoke up from his station. “I give up. I can’t find any significance to this symbol. Maybe Captain Bryant will be able to use her contacts in the intelligence agencies to offer some further insight once she gets here.”

Painter joined Jason, staring at the set of Chinese characters glowing on the screen. The symbols had been found etched on the recovered drive’s housing.

方舟

“All I can tell you is that this translates from Mandarin as ‘The Ark,’ ” Jason said. “But beyond that, I have no clue to its significance.”

Painter placed a palm on his shoulder. “That’ll have to do for now. Why don’t you head home and get some well-deserved rest?”

Jason nodded, but he did not look happy.

Neither am I.

Once Painter had the place to himself, he brought up a video file on another screen. It was footage from one of the countless security cams that monitored the nation’s capital. In this case, it covered the National Mall.

He watched a small Jeep shoot up the side of a mountain of dirt, coming to an abrupt halt near the top. The pair of pursuing motorcycles shot past the stalled vehicle and went sailing high—before descending in a deadly plunge into a dark pit.

Painter rubbed his chin, appreciating the quick wits and skill involved in pulling off

that takedown. He sensed that there remained unplumbed depths to that driver. He even allowed himself to consider an impossible proposition.

Maybe it's high time I gave Kowalski his own mission.

What's True, What's Not

At the end of my full-length novels, I love to spell out what's real and what's fiction. I thought I'd briefly do the same here.

SMITHSONIAN'S CONSERVATION BIOLOGY INSTITUTE. This research station's main facility encompasses 3,200 acres in Fort Royal, Virginia, but it also has a campus at the Rock Creek Research Labs at the National Zoo. One of the programs mentioned here—the “Ancient DNA” project—is an ongoing endeavor. The researchers seek to study changing patterns of genetic variation over time by analyzing DNA collected from museum specimens and archaeological artifacts. Where this might lead—as well as the implication for our species—is fascinating. And it leaves lots of room for further exploration on an even grander scale.

NATIONAL MALL TURF AND SOIL RESTORATION. This is indeed an active project to restore the thirteen acres of heavily trafficked lawns. Since the current phase of this project has ripped up the acres that lie between the Smithsonian Castle and the National Museum of Natural History, I thought what better chance for an off-road chase scene, especially with the site's towering piles of dirt and deep excavations, including the digging of a 250,000-gallon cistern to collect storm water.

CHINESE HACKERS. IT seems like seldom a week goes by that we don't hear of a new cyber attack by Chinese agents, whether it's the infiltration of the Office of Personnel Management or the theft of fighter jet schematics. But these incursions are not only to steal intellectual property; they're also to compromise systems. Chinese cyber forces—which do number into the hundreds of thousands—have damaged systems aboard commercial ships and even an airline used by the U.S. And they have grown bolder of late, even sending operatives onto U.S. shores in an attempt to nab Chinese defectors, as reported by the president recently. As to the next level of attack, I believe it's coming—soon.

So that ends this tale—but as you might imagine, it’s only the beginning of a much larger story, an epic adventure like no other, one that will reveal a real-life archaeological mystery tied to Neil Armstrong, one that masks a monumental secret about the moon itself . . . all that, and also the introduction of a new character, unlike any seen in print before.

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Keep reading for a sneak peek at the greatest Sigma Force novel to date—a story that will leave you forever changed.

Coming in December 2015 from William Morrow

Epigraphs

***Intelligence* is an accident of evolution, and not necessarily an advantage.**

—ISAAC ASIMOV

The measure of *intelligence* is the ability to change.

—ALBERT EINSTEIN

Prologue

*Autumn, 38,000 B.C.
Southern Alps*

“RUN, CHILD!”

Fires lit the woods behind them. For the past day, the flames had chased K’ruk and his daughter higher into the snowy mountains. But it was not the choking smoke or searing heat that K’ruk feared most. He searched behind him, seeking to catch a glimpse of the hunters, those who had set the forest afire in pursuit of the pair, but he saw no sign of the enemy.

Still, he heard the howling of wolves in the distance, great beasts that bowed to the will of those hunters. The pack sounded closer now, only a valley away.

He glanced worriedly toward the sun as it sat near the horizon. The ruddy glow in the sky reminded him of the promise of warmth that lay in that direction, of their home caves tunneled under green hills and black rock, where water still flowed and the deer and bison roamed thickly in the woods of the lower slopes.

He imagined those home fires blazing bright, spitted meat dripping fat into the sizzling flames, the clan gathering together before settling in for the night. He longed for that old life, but he knew that path was no longer open to him—or especially for his daughter.

A sharp cry of pain drew his attention forward. Onka had slipped on a moss-slick rock and fallen hard. She was normally surefooted, but they had been in flight for three long days.

He hurried to her and pulled her up, her young face shining with fear and sweat. He stopped long enough to cup her cheek. In her small features, he saw whispers of her mother, a clan healer who had died shortly after Onka was born. He curled a finger in his daughter’s fiery hair.

So like your mother’s. . .

But he also saw more in Onka’s features, those aspects that branded her as different. Her nose was thinner than any of K’ruk’s clan, even for a girl of only nine winters. Her brow was also straighter, less heavy. He stared into her blue eyes, as bright as a summer sky. That shine and those features marked her as a blended spirit, someone who walked halfway between K’ruk’s people and those who had come recently from the south with their thinner limbs and quicker tongues.

Such special children were said to be omens, proving by their births how the two tribes—new and old—could live together in peace. Perhaps not in the same caves, but they could at least share the same hunting grounds. And as the two tribes grew closer, more were born like Onka. These children were revered. They looked at the world with

different eyes, becoming great shamans, healers, or hunters.

Then two days ago, a clansman from a neighboring valley had arrived. He had been wounded unto death, but he still had enough breath to warn of a mighty enemy, a blight spreading across the mountains. This mysterious clan came in large numbers, hunting for such special ones as Onka. No tribes were allowed to harbor such children. Those that did were slaughtered.

Upon hearing of this, K'ruk knew he could not jeopardize his clan, nor would he allow Onka to be taken. So he had fled with his daughter, but someone must have alerted the enemy about their flight.

About Onka.

I will not let them have you.

He took her hand and set a harder pace, but before long, Onka was stumbling more than walking, limping on her injured ankle. He picked her up as they crested a ridge and stared down into the forest below. A creek cut along the bottom, promising a place to drink.

"We can rest there," he said, pointing. "But only for a short—"

A branch snapped off to the left. Dropping into a wary crouch, he lowered Onka and raised his stone-tipped spear. A slender shape appeared from behind a deadfall, cloaked and booted in reindeer leather. Their gazes met. Even without a word spoken, K'ruk knew this other was like Onka, one born of mixed spirits. But from his clothing and from the way he tied his shaggy hair with a leather cord, it was clear he was not of K'ruk's clan but from those slender-limbed tribes who came later to these mountains.

Another howl rose behind them, sounding even closer.

The stranger cocked his ear, listening; then a hand rose and beckoned. Words were spoken, but K'ruk did not understand them. Finally, the stranger simply waved his arm, pointed toward the creek, and set off down the wooded slope.

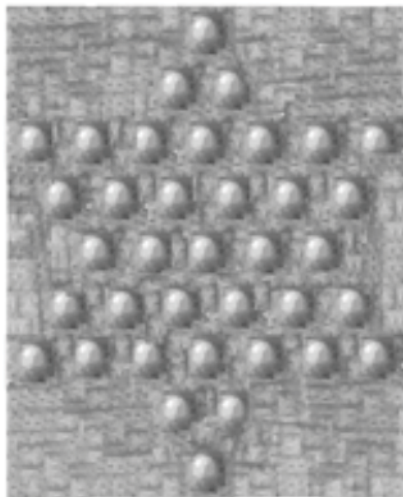
K'ruk considered whether to follow, but another baying of the enemy's wolves set him off after the stranger. He fled, carrying Onka to keep up with the man's agile passage. Reaching the creek, they discovered others waiting for them there, a group of ten or twelve, some younger than Onka, others hunchbacked elders. They bore markings from several clans.

Still, the group shared one common feature.

They were all of mixed spirits.

The stranger came forward and dropped to a knee before Onka. A finger touched her brow and ran along her cheekbone, plainly recognizing Onka as one of a similar kind.

His daughter in turn reached and touched a marking on the stranger's forehead: a pebbling of scars in a strange pointed shape.



Onka's fingertip ran over those bumps as if finding hidden meaning there. The other grinned, seeming to sense the child's understanding.

The stranger straightened and laid a palm upon his own chest. "Teron," he said.

K'ruk knew this must be his name, but the stranger spoke rapidly after that, waving to one of the elders who leaned heavily upon a thick gnarled staff.

The old man came forward and spoke in K'ruk's people's tongue. "Teron says the girl may join us. We are heading through a high pass that Teron knows, one that is yet free of ice, but only for another few days. If we can make it ahead of the enemy, we can break the hunters from our trail."

"Until those snows thaw again," K'ruk added worriedly.

"That won't be for many moons. We will have vanished by then, our trail long cold."

A fresh howling of wolves in the distance reminded them that the trail was far from cold at the moment.

The elder recognized this, too. "We must go now before they fall upon us."

"And you will take my daughter?" He pushed Onka toward Teron.

Teron reached and gripped K'ruk by the shoulder, squeezing a promise with his strong fingers.

"She is welcome," the elder assured him. "We will protect her. But on this long trek, we could use your strong back and sharp spear."

K'ruk took a step away and gripped the shaft of his weapon more firmly. "The enemy comes too swiftly. I will use my last breaths to turn them from your trail or hold them off long enough for you and the others to reach the pass."

Onka's gaze met his, already teary-eyed with understanding. "Papa . . ."

His chest ached as he spoke. "This is your clan now, Onka. They will see you to better lands, where you will be safe and where you will grow into the strong woman I know you can be."

Onka broke free of Teron's grip and leaped at K'ruk, wrapping her thin arms around his neck.

With grief choking him as much as his daughter's arms, he pulled Onka free and

passed her to Teron, who hugged her from behind. K'ruk leaned and touched his forehead to Onka's brow, saying good-bye, knowing he would never see his daughter again.

He then stood, turned, and strode away from the creek, heading up the slope toward the howling of wolves—but all he heard were the plaintive cries of Onka behind him.

Live well, my child.

He climbed more swiftly, determined to keep her safe. Once he reached the ridgeline, he sped toward the baying of the hunters' beasts. Their cries had grown more raucous, rising from the next valley over.

He ran now, loping in great strides.

He reached the next crest as the sun sank away, filling the valley below with shadows. Slowing, he descended more cautiously, warily, especially as the wolves had gone silent now. He ducked low, sliding from shadow to shadow, staying downwind of the pack, careful of each step so as not to snap a branch.

At last he could spy the bottom of the valley, noting the stirring of darkness below. The wolves. One of the beasts shifted fully into view, revealing a shape unlike any wolf. Its mane was heavily matted. Scars marked its massive bulk. Lips rippled back to reveal long, yellowed fangs.

Though his heart pounded in his throat, K'ruk remained crouched, waiting for the masters of those monstrous beasts to show themselves.

Finally, taller shadows folded out of the trees. The largest stepped into view and revealed the true face of the enemy for the first time.

K'ruk went cold at the sight, terror icing through him.

No, it cannot be. . .

Still, he tightened his grip on his spear and glanced over his shoulder.

Run, Onka. Run and never stop.

*Spring 1669
Rome, Papal States*

Nicolas Steno marched the young emissary through the depths of the museum of the Collegio Romano. The stranger was heavily cloaked, his boots muddy, all a plain testament to both his urgency and secrecy.

The German messenger had been dispatched by Leopold I, the Holy Roman Emperor to the north. The package he carried was intended for Nicolas's dear friend, Father Athanasius Kircher, the creator of this museum.

The emissary gaped at the many curiosities of nature found here, at the Egyptian obelisks, at the mechanical wonders that ticked and hummed, all crowned overhead by soaring domes decorated with astronomical details. The young man's gaze caught upon a boulder of amber, lit behind by candlelight, revealing the preserved body of a lizard inside.

"Don't tarry," Nicolas warned and drew the messenger onward.

Nicolas knew every corner of this place, every bound volume, mostly works by the master of this museum. Nicolas had spent the better part of a year here, sent by his own

benefactor, the Grand Duke of Tuscany, to study the museum's contents in order to construct his own cabinet of curiosities back at the duke's palazzo in Florence.

At last he reached a tall oak door and pounded a fist on it.

A voice responded. "Enter."

He hauled the door open and ushered the emissary into a small study, lit by the coals of a dying fire. "I'm sorry to disturb you, Reverend Father."

The German messenger immediately dropped to one knee before the wide desk, bowing his head.

A long sigh rose from the figure bent amid the piles of books atop the desk. He held a quill in hand, the tip poised over a large parchment. "Come to rifle through my collection yet again, dear Nicolas? I should tell you that I've taken to numbering the books shelved here."

Nicolas smiled. "I promise to return my copy of *Mundus Subterraneus* once I've fully refuted many of your claims found therein."

"Is that so? I hear you're putting the final flourishes upon your own work concerning the subterranean mysteries of rock and crystal."

He bowed his head in acknowledgment. "Indeed. But before I present it, I would humbly welcome a similar searing analysis from one such as yourself."

After Nicolas had arrived here a year ago, the two had spent many long nights in deep discourse concerning all manner of science, theology, and philosophy. Though Kircher was thirty-seven years his elder and deserved respect, the priest appreciated anyone willing to challenge him. In fact, upon their first meeting, the pair had argued vigorously concerning a paper Nicolas had published two years previously, declaring that glossopetrae or "tongue stones" found embedded in rocks were actually the teeth of ancient sharks. Father Kircher held a similar interest in bones and pieces of the past locked in stratified stone. They had hotly debated the origin of such mysteries. It was in such a crucible of scientific inquiry that the two had become each other's admirers, colleagues, and most of all, friends.

Father Kircher's gaze settled upon the emissary, still on bended knee before his overloaded desk. "And who is your companion?"

"He comes with a package from Leopold I. It would seem the emperor has remembered enough of his Jesuit education to send something of import to your doorstep. Leopold appealed to the Grand Duke to have me present this man to you with some urgency, under a cloak of dire secrecy."

Father Kircher lowered his quill. "Intriguing."

They both knew the current emperor had an interest in science and the natural world, instilled in him by the Jesuit scholars who had tutored the man in his youth. Emperor Leopold himself had been headed into the church until the death of his older brother to the pox had placed the pious scholar onto that cold northern throne.

Father Kircher waved to the messenger. "Enough of this foolish posturing, my good man. Stand and deliver what you've traveled so far to present."

The emissary rose up and pulled back the cowl of his hood, revealing the face of a young man who could not be more than twenty years. From a satchel, he retrieved a thick letter, plainly sealed with the emperor's sigil. He stepped forward and placed it upon the desk, then quickly stepped back.

Kircher glanced toward Nicolas, who merely shrugged, equally in the dark about the particulars of this matter.

Kircher retrieved a knife and slit through the seal to open the package. A small object rolled out and toppled to the desktop. It was a bone, frosted with crystalline rock. Pinching his brow, Kircher pulled out and unfolded a parchment included with the artifact. Even from steps away, Nicolas saw it was a detailed map of eastern Europe. Father Kircher studied it for a breath.

"I don't understand the meaning of all of this," Kircher said. "This map and this bit of old bone. They come with no letter of explanation."

The emissary finally spoke, his Italian thickly accented. "The emperor chose me to deliver the other half of this message, words I was sworn to set to memory and reveal only to you, Reverend Father."

"And what are those words?"

"The emperor knows of your interest in the ancient past, in those secrets buried in the bowels of the earth, and requests your aid in investigating what was revealed at the site marked on the map."

"And what might be found there?" Nicolas asked. "More bones, such as this?"

He stepped closer and studied the ossified sliver, the crusts of whitish rock. He sensed the great antiquity of what lay upon the desk.

"Bones and much more," the messenger concurred.

"And who do these bones belong to?" Kircher asked. "Whose grave do they mark?"

The young man answered, his words shocking. Then before either man could respond, the messenger swiftly drew out a dagger and sliced his own throat from ear to ear. Blood poured forth as the man choked and collapsed first to his knees, then to the floor.

Nicolas rushed to the young man's aid, cursing at such brutal necessity. It seemed those final words were meant only for Father Kircher and himself, and once dispatched, were never to be spoken again.

Father Kircher rounded his desk and dropped to a knee, taking the young man's hand between his palms, but his question was for Nicolas. "Could it be true?"

Nicolas swallowed, dismayed by the last message spoken through those bloody lips.

The bones . . . they belong to Adam and Eve.

Chapter 1

*April 29, 10:32 A.M. CEST
Karlovac County, Croatia*

WE SHOULDN'T BE HERE.

A trickle of superstitious dread stopped Roland Novak on a switchback of the trail. He raised his hand against the morning sun and stared at the craggy mountaintop ahead. Black clouds stacked in the distance.

According to Croatian folktales—stories he had heard as a child—during stormy nights, witches and fairies would gather atop the summit of Klek Mountain, where their screams would be heard all the way to the neighboring city of Ogulin. It was a peak haunted by tales of the unwary or the unlucky meeting horrible fates.

For centuries, such legends had kept the peak fairly unmolested. But in the past few decades that had changed when the crag's towering cliffs drew an ever-increasing number of local rock climbers. Still, this was not why Roland and the others risked scaling the northern side of the mountain this morning.

"It's not much farther," Alex Wrightson promised. "Best we be in and out before the storm hits."

The British geologist led the foursome, looking as solidly built as these peaks, though he had to be close to seventy years old. He wore khaki hiking shorts despite the chill, revealing strong, wiry legs. His snow-white hair, fuller than Roland's own receding blond hairline, was tucked under a climbing helmet.

"That's the third time he's claimed that," Lena Crandall mumbled under her breath to Roland. A fine sheen of perspiration from the hour-long climb made her cheeks glow, but she didn't seem winded. Then again, she was in her midtwenties, and from the well-worn boots on her feet, he figured she must do a fair amount of hiking herself.

She stared at the skies, studying the towering wall of dark clouds. "Luckily I was able to get here a day early," she said. "Once that storm breaks, these mountains will be swamped for who knows how long."

In acknowledgment of that threat, the group set a harder pace up the unmarked trail. Lena unzipped her thermal expedition jacket and adjusted an old backpack higher on her shoulders. It bore the logo for Emory University, her alma mater in Atlanta, Georgia. Roland knew little else about this American, except that she was a geneticist who had been called away from a fellowship at the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology in Leipzig, Germany. And like Roland, she was equally in the dark about the reason behind this sudden summons by the British geologist and his partner, a French paleontologist.

As they climbed, Dr. Dayne Arnaud spoke in low whispers with Wrightson, and

though Roland could not make out the paleontologist's words, especially with the man's thick French accent, the researcher plainly sounded irritated. So far neither of the men had shared any more details concerning the group's destination or what they had discovered here.

Roland forced himself to be patient. He had grown up in Zagreb, the capital of Croatia, but he knew all the stories surrounding this peak of the Dinaric Alps. Its summit bore an uncanny resemblance to a giant lying on its back. It was said to be the body of the giant Klek, who battled the god Volos and was turned to stone for his affront. Before being petrified, the giant swore that he would one day break free from his slumber and exact revenge upon the world.

Roland felt a flicker of superstitious unease.

Because that giant had been rumbling of late.

This region was prone to earthquakes, a fact that possibly gave rise to this legend of a slumbering giant. Then last month a strong quake registering 5.2 on the Richter scale had shaken the region, even cracking the bell tower of a medieval church in the nearby city of Ogulin.

Roland suspected that quake was tied to whatever had been discovered by the geologist and paleontologist. His suspicions proved true when the party circled past a craggy shoulder of the mountain and into a dense patch of pines. Ahead, a massive chunk of rock had broken from the cliff face and shattered into the forest, knocking down trees and smashing through the landscape, like the stomping of the mighty Klek himself.

Wrightson spoke as they followed a path through the maze of boulders and shattered trunks. "A local bird watcher stumbled upon the destruction here after last month's quake. He was hiking early enough in the morning to see steam rising from between a few boulders, hinting at the possibility of a cavern system below."

"And you believe the recent earthquake cracked this system open?" Lena asked.

"Indeed." Wrightson waved an arm. "Not a particularly surprising outcome. This whole range is made up mostly of karst, a form of limestone. All the rainfall and abundant springs have made this region a geological playground, full of marvels. Underground rivers, sinkholes, caves—you name it."

Roland stared at Arnaud. "But it was *more* than just an old cave you found here."

Wrightson glanced back, his eyes glinting with amused excitement. "Best we don't ruin the surprise. Isn't that right, Dr. Arnaud?"

The paleontologist grumbled sourly, a match to the scowl that seemed permanently etched on his features. While Wrightson was gregarious and outgoing, the Frenchman was his dark shadow, ever grim and meanspirited. The researcher was only a few years older than Roland, who was thirty-two, but Arnaud's attitude made him seem far older. Roland suspected much of Arnaud's attitude rose from his annoyance at both his and the American's inclusion here today. Roland knew how some scientists could become very territorial about their work.

"Ah, here we are!" Wrightson declared, stepping forward to the top of a ladder that protruded from a nondescript hole in the ground.

Focused on the goal, Roland missed the figure standing in the shadow of a boulder until the large man stepped into the sunlight. He had a rifle resting on his shoulder.

Though the guard was dressed in civilian clothes, his stiff stance, the sharp creases in his clothes, and the steely glint in his eyes all suggested a military background. Even his black hair was shaved to stubble, looking more like a peaked skullcap.

He spoke rapidly to Arnaud in French.

Roland didn't speak the language, but from the attitude, the guard plainly was not subservient to the paleontologist, more a colleague on equal footing. The guard pointed toward the darkening skies, seeming to be arguing about whether to allow them to go below. Finally he cursed, stepped to a generator, and yanked on a cord, setting the engine to rumbling.

"That would be Commandant Henri Gerard," Wrightson introduced. "He's with the Chasseurs Alpins, the elite French mountain infantry. He and his men have been keeping anyone from trespassing here."

Roland glanced around, trying to spot any other soldiers, but he failed.

"A sad but necessary precaution, I'm afraid," Wrightson continued. "After the birder discovered this possible entrance, he contacted a caving club to investigate. Lucky for us, the club's members adhere to a strict and secretive code of conduct. When they discovered the importance of what lay below, they preserved what they found and reached out to their French comrades, those who oversaw the preservation of such famous caves as Chauvet and Lascaux."

With a background in art history, Roland understood the significance of mentioning those two caves. The sites were famous for their Paleolithic cave art, paintings done by the oldest ancestors of modern man.

He stared toward the opening, suspecting now what must lie below.

Lena also understood. "Did you find cave artwork down there?"

Wrightson lifted one eyebrow. "Oh, we found so much more." His gaze settled on Roland. "It's why we contacted the Vatican, Father Novak . . . why you were summoned from the Croatian Catholic University in Zagreb to join us."

Roland peered down into the tunnel. As thunder rumbled in the distance, dread drew him to touch the white Roman collar at his neck.

Arnaud spoke in his heavily accented voice, his disdain ringing clear. "Father Novak, you are here to witness and verify the miracle we've found."

Click [here](#) to buy *The Bone Labyrinth*.

About the Author

JAMES ROLLINS is the *New York Times* bestselling author of thrillers translated into forty languages. His Sigma series has been lauded as one of the “top crowd pleasers” (*New York Times*) and one of the “hottest summer reads” (*People* magazine). Acclaimed for his originality, Rollins unveils unseen worlds, scientific breakthroughs, and historical secrets—and he does it all at breakneck speed. Find James Rollins on Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter, and at www.jamesrollins.com.

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